



Honduran-U.S. Relations

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Summary

On January 27, 2010, Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo Sosa was inaugurated President of Honduras. Lobo assumed power after seven months of domestic political crisis and international isolation that had resulted from the June 28, 2009, ouster of President Manuel Zelaya. While the strength of Lobo’s National Party in the legislature should help the government secure approval of its policy agenda, the political crisis left the new President with daunting challenges, including a high level of domestic political polarization, difficulty securing international recognition, a battered economy, and a poor human rights situation exacerbated by the murders of journalists and human rights defenders. Moreover, for a number of years, Honduras has had a poor security situation with high rates of violent crime.

The Honduran economy has undergone significant changes since the 1990s. While traditional agricultural exports of coffee and bananas are still important, nontraditional sectors, especially the maquiladora, or export-processing industry, have grown significantly. Substantial economic growth helped reduce poverty, but the country’s political crisis and the global economic downturn in 2009 led to an economic contraction. The country continues to face high poverty, estimated at almost 69%, as well as high infant mortality and a significant HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Although relations were strained during the political crisis, the United States has traditionally had a close relationship with Honduras. Broad U.S. policy goals include a strengthened democracy with an effective justice system that protects human rights and promotes the rule of law, and the promotion of sustainable economic growth with a more open economy and improved living conditions. In addition to providing Honduras with substantial amounts of foreign assistance and maintaining significant military and economic ties, the United States cooperates with Honduras to deal with transnational issues such as illegal migration, crime, narcotics trafficking, trafficking in persons, and port security.

With respect to the political crisis, several resolutions were introduced during the first session of the 111th Congress. These ranged from condemning Zelaya for his “unconstitutional and illegal” actions (H.Res. 619, Mack) to condemning the “coup d’état” in Honduras (H.Res. 630, Delahunt) and calling upon the Micheletti government to end its “illegal seizure of power” (H.Res. 620, Serrano). Another resolution (H.Res. 749, Ros-Lehtinen) called on the Obama Administration to recognize the November 2009 elections “as an important step in the consolidation of democracy and rule of law in Honduras.” In the second session, H.Res. 1197 (Rohrabacher) would express support for democracy in Honduras and call on nations to restore normal relations with the government of Honduras.

This report examines current political and economic conditions in Honduras as well as issues in Honduran-U.S. relations. For a more detailed examination of the Honduran political crisis, see CRS Report R41064, *Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010*.

For additional information, see CRS Report R40135, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, CRS Report RL34112, *Gangs in Central America*, CRS Report RL32427, *Millennium Challenge Corporation*, and CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues*.

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Recent Developments

On June 16, 2010, the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere held a hearing on “Press Freedom in the Americas” that focused in part on the killing of journalists and the deterioration of press rights in Honduras.

On June 14, 2010, journalist Luis Arturo Mondragón was shot and killed in Honduras, the eighth journalist to be killed this year. Human rights organizations, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, condemned the killing and urged the Honduran government to investigate and prosecute the murders of journalists.

On June 7, 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published its observations on its May 2010 visit to Honduras that documented the continuation of human rights violations in the country, including the murder of journalists and human rights defenders. (The full report is available at <http://www.cidh.oas.org/Comunicados/English/2010/59-10eng.htm>.)

In late May 2010, Tropical Storm Agatha, the first storm of the hurricane season, caused extensive flooding in several areas of Honduras resulting in 18 deaths and damage to 14,000 acres of farmland.

On May 5, 2010, the U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security extended temporary protected status (TPS) covering some 66,000 Hondurans residing in the United States because Honduras would be unable to adequately handle their return. The United States originally extended TPS to eligible Hondurans in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and it has been extended nine times. It had been scheduled to expire on July 5, 2010.

On May 4, 2010, the Honduran government inaugurated a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) headed by former Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein that will investigate the events surrounding the ouster of President Zelaya in 2009 and make recommendations so these events will not be repeated. (For more, see the “Political Reconciliation” section.)

On March 18, 2010, the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere held a hearing entitled “Next Steps for Honduras” featuring Administration and private witnesses.

On March 11, 2010, the State Department released its 2009 human rights report on Honduras. The report detailed numerous human rights problems, including “unlawful killings by members of the police and government agents,” “arbitrary and summary killings committed by vigilantes and former members of the security forces,” and “arbitrary detention and disproportionate use of force by security forces after the June (2009) coup.” (See the full text of the report, available at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136117.htm>.)

On March 1, 2010, the State Department released its 2010 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report, which maintained that both air and maritime transshipment of cocaine through Honduras increased in 2009, with an estimated 200 metric tons transiting the country. The report maintained that cocaine seizures decreased in the second half of 2009 because of the reassignment of security forces by the Micheletti government to counter political unrest and also because of the suspension of U.S. assistance.

Figure 1. Map of Honduras



Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS Graphics.

Political Situation

Background

A Central American nation of 7.4 million people, Honduras had enjoyed 27 years of democratic, constitutional governance prior to the forced removal of President Manuel Zelaya from office in June 2009. The Liberal (PL) and National (PN) parties have been Honduras' two dominant political parties since the military relinquished political control in 1982. Both were considered to be ideologically center-right, and there appeared to be few major differences between the two.

Manuel Zelaya of the PL was elected president in November 2005, narrowly defeating his PN rival, Porfirio Lobo. Zelaya—a wealthy landowner with considerable investments in the timber

and cattle industries—was generally regarded as a moderate when he was inaugurated to a four-year term in January 2006.¹ As his term progressed, however, Zelaya advanced a number of populist policies, including free school enrollment, an increase in teachers' pay, and a 60% increase in the minimum wage.² Zelaya also forged closer relations with Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, joining PetroCaribe and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) in 2008.³ Although Zelaya's populist policies allowed him to maintain considerable support among certain sectors of Honduran society, they alienated many within the traditional economic and political elite. Likewise, his Administration's inability to achieve concrete results on a number of issues of importance—such as poverty and violent crime—significantly weakened his public standing.⁴

Political Crisis⁵

Detention and Expulsion of Zelaya

On June 28, 2009, the Honduran military detained President Zelaya and flew him to forced exile in Costa Rica. The ouster followed several months of political polarization between Honduran governmental institutions resulting from Zelaya's intention to hold a non-binding referendum and eventually amend the constitution. After the military deposed the President, the Honduran Supreme Court asserted that an arrest warrant had been issued for Zelaya as a result of his noncompliance with judicial decisions that had declared the non-binding referendum unconstitutional. However, the military's actions halted the judicial process before a trial could be held.⁶ The Honduran National Congress then adopted a resolution to replace Zelaya with the President of Congress, Roberto Micheletti.⁷

The United States and the rest of the international community universally condemned Zelaya's ouster and called for his return. They leveled a series of diplomatic and economic sanctions against the Micheletti government and pushed for a negotiated agreement to end the crisis. Although Zelaya clandestinely returned to Honduras in September 2009, he was never restored to office and was forced to remain in the Brazilian embassy in Tegucigalpa until January 27, 2010,

¹ "People Profile: Manuel 'Mel' Zelaya," *Latin News Daily*, November 15, 2005; "Manuel Zelaya: empresario conservador que transitó a la izquierda," *Agencia Mexicana de Noticias*, June 29, 2009.

² The minimum wage decree—which did not affect the maquila sector's monthly minimum wage that fluctuates between 6,000 and 7,000 Lempiras (\$318-\$370)—increased the rural monthly minimum wage to 4,055 Lempiras (\$215) and the urban monthly minimum wage to 5,500 Lempiras (\$291). Calculations are based on an exchange rate of \$1 U.S. dollar to 18.9 Honduran lempiras. "Elevan a L.5,500 el salario mínimo en Honduras," *El Heraldo* (Honduras), December 24, 2008.

³ PetroCaribe is a Venezuelan program that provides oil at preferential discounted rates to Caribbean countries. ALBA is a socially oriented trade block that includes cooperation in a range of areas such as health, education, culture, investment, and finance. ALBA members include Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. The National Congress ratified Honduras' entrance into both PetroCaribe and ALBA. "Honduras: Congress signs up to Petrocaribe" *Latin American Caribbean & Central America Report*, March 2008; "Honduras: Congress approves Alba, with caveats," *Latin American Caribbean & Central America Report*, October 2008.

⁴ Mica Rosenberg, "Protests erupt, gunshots heard after Honduras coup," *Reuters*, June 28, 2009.

⁵ For a more detailed examination of the Honduran political crisis, see CRS Report R41064, *Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010*.

⁶ Poder Judicial de Honduras, "Expediente Judicial Relación Documentada Caso Zelaya Rosales," available at <http://www.poderjudicial.gob.hn/>.

⁷ "El decreto de la separación de Zelaya," *El Heraldo* (Honduras), June 28, 2009.

when newly inaugurated President Porfirio Lobo granted him safe passage to the Dominican Republic.⁸

Micheletti Government

Micheletti insisted that he took office through a “constitutional succession” throughout the seven months between Zelaya’s forced removal and the inauguration of President Lobo.⁹ While in power, Micheletti and the Honduran National Congress passed a 2009 budget and annulled more than a dozen decrees and reforms approved under Zelaya, including Honduras’ accession to the Venezuelan-led trade bloc known as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).¹⁰ Prior to adjourning in mid-January 2010, the Honduran National Congress named Micheletti a “deputy-for-life,” and offered life-long security to Micheletti and some 50 other Honduran officials involved in his government or the ouster of Zelaya.¹¹ Although Micheletti received substantial support from some sectors of Honduran society, an October 2009 poll found that just 36% of Hondurans approved of Micheletti’s job in office and 59% believed he rarely or never did what was in the interest of the Honduran people. The same poll found that 42% of Hondurans recognized Zelaya as president, while 36% recognized Micheletti.¹²

During his government, Micheletti maintained tight control of Honduran society, severely restricting political opposition. On the day of the ouster, security forces patrolled the streets; a curfew was put in place and a number of local and international television and radio stations were shut down or intimidated.¹³ Over the next several months, the Micheletti government periodically implemented curfews—often arbitrarily and with little or no prior notification—and issued decrees restricting civil liberties.¹⁴ The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), an autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS), asserts that during the Micheletti government, serious violations of human rights occurred, including “deaths, an arbitrary declaration of a state of emergency, suppression of public demonstrations through disproportionate use of force, criminalization of public protest, arbitrary detentions of thousands of persons, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and grossly inadequate conditions of detention, militarization of Honduran territory, a surge in incidents of racial discrimination, violations of women’s rights, serious and arbitrary restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, and grave violations of political rights.”¹⁵

⁸ “Zelaya deja Honduras tras 4 meses en la Embajada de Brasil,” *EFE News Service*, January 27, 2010.

⁹ Roberto Micheletti, “Moving Forward in Honduras,” *Washington Post*, September 22, 2009.

¹⁰ “Honduras: Micheletti prepares to leave on high note,” *Latin American Weekly Report*, January 21, 2010.

¹¹ “Congreso de Honduras designa a Micheletti ‘diputado vitalicio,’” *Agence France Presse*, January 13, 2010; “Más de 50 funcionarios gozarán de seguridad vitalicia,” *El Tiempo* (Honduras), January 15, 2010.

¹² “Hondureños ven solución en presidente alternativo y elecciones, según sondeo,” *EFE News Service*, October 27, 2009; “Honduras: 42% reconoce a Zelaya como presidente, 36% a Micheletti (encuesta),” *Agence France Presse*, October 28, 2009.

¹³ “Honduras: Decretan toque de queda por 48 horas,” *La Prensa* (Honduras), June 28, 2009; “Honduras: Media Blackout, Protests Reported,” *Stratfor*, June 29, 2009.

¹⁴ “Honduras suspende derechos constitucionales durante toque queda,” *Reuters*, July 1, 2009; Amnesty International, “Honduras: human rights crisis threatens as repression increases,” August 2009.

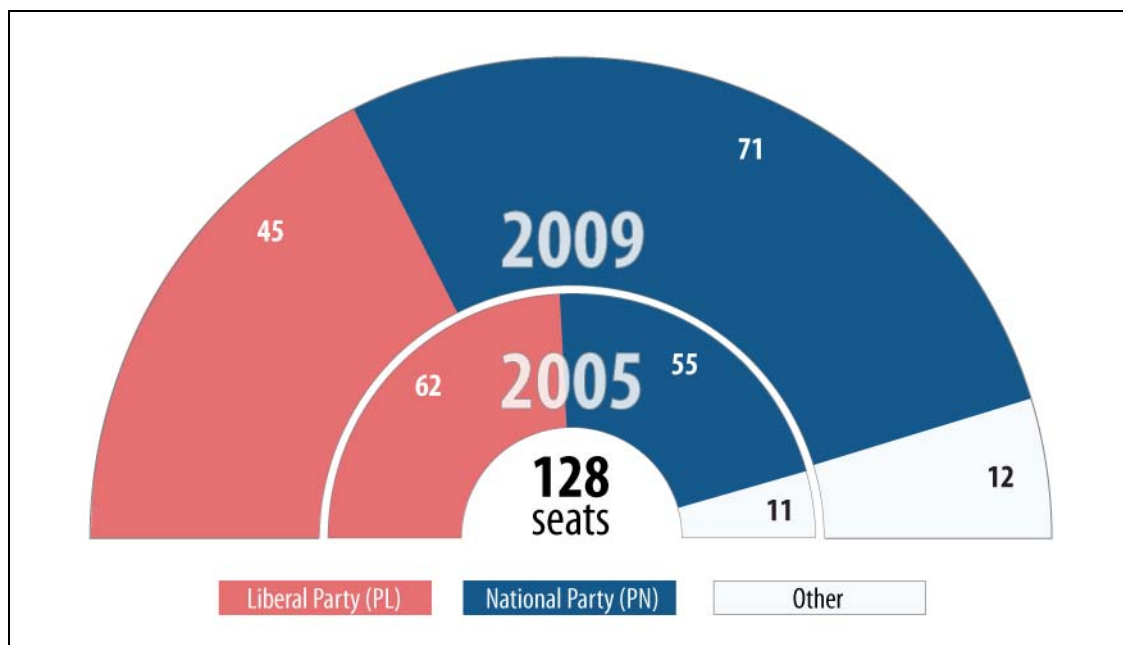
¹⁵ Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, *Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup D’état*, Organization of American States, OEA/Ser.L/V/II. Doc. 55, December 30, 2009.

November 2009 Elections

Results

On November 29, 2009, Honduras held general elections to fill nearly 3,000 posts nationwide, including the presidency and all 128 seats in the unicameral National Congress.¹⁶ Former President of Congress and 2005 National Party (PN) presidential nominee Porfirio Lobo easily defeated his closest rival, former Vice President Elvin Santos of the Liberal Party (PL), 56.6% to 38.1%. Three minor party candidates won a combined 5.3% of the presidential vote.¹⁷ Lobo's PN also won an absolute majority in the unicameral National Congress, with 71 of the 128 (see **Figure 2** for the change in the balance of power). The election was a major defeat for the PL, which has traditionally had the broadest base of support in Honduras. On top of its poor presidential showing, it won just 45 seats in Congress, down from 62 in 2005.¹⁸ According to some analysts, many Hondurans held the PL responsible for the country's political crisis as a result of Zelaya and Micheletti both belonging to the party. Likewise, traditional PL supporters were divided over the ouster, leading many from Zelaya's faction to stay home on election day.¹⁹

Figure 2. Party Affiliation in the Unicameral Honduran National Congress
(2005 and 2009 Election Results)



Source: CRS Graphics.

¹⁶ "Elecciones, incierto antídoto contra la crisis socio política," *El Tiempo* (Honduras), August 31, 2009.

¹⁷ "TSE confirma el triunfo de 'Pepe' en las elecciones," *El Heraldo* (Honduras), December 21, 2009.

¹⁸ "Final results in Honduras," *Latin News Daily*, December 22, 2009.

¹⁹ Noé Leiva, "El Partido Liberal de Zelaya, el gran perdedor de los comicios hondureños," *Agence France Presse*, November 30, 2009; "Partido Liberal sacrificó el poder para salvar democracia," *La Tribuna* (Honduras), December 3, 2009.

Legitimacy

There has been considerable debate—both in Honduras and the international community—concerning the legitimacy of the November 2009 elections. Supporters of the elections note that the electoral process was initiated, and the members of the autonomous Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) were chosen, prior to Zelaya’s ouster. They also note that the candidates were selected in internationally observed primary elections in November 2008,²⁰ and that election day was largely²¹ free of political violence.²² Nonetheless, some Hondurans and international observers have argued that the Micheletti government’s suppression of opposition media and demonstrators prevented a fair electoral campaign from taking place. This led to election boycotts and a number of left-leaning candidates for a variety of offices withdrawing from the elections, including an independent presidential candidate and some incumbent Members of Congress.²³ It also led organizations that traditionally observe elections in the hemisphere, such as the OAS, the EU, and the Carter Center, to cancel their electoral observation missions.²⁴ Critics of the elections also assert that the electoral turnout, which was just under 50% (5 points lower than 2005), demonstrated a rejection of the elections by the Honduran people. Supporters of the elections counter this assertion by arguing that Lobo won more absolute votes in 2009 than Zelaya did in 2005, and that the electoral rolls are artificially inflated—distorting the turnout rate—as a result of Honduras not purging the rolls of those who have died or migrated overseas.²⁵ Although a growing number of Hondurans and members of the international community have recognized Lobo as the legitimate President of Honduras, some have refused to do so.²⁶

²⁰ Former Vice President Elvin Santos, although originally ruled constitutionally ineligible to run by the TSE, became the PL presidential nominee following a series of events that included congressional passage of a special decree and a 52%-32% primary victory by his stand-in-candidate, Mauricio Villeda, over then President of Congress, Roberto Micheletti. “Honduras’ Vice President Regains the Right to Run; Elvin Santos is Partido Liberal Presidential Candidate,” *Latin America Data Base NotiCen*, March 5, 2009.

²¹ A demonstration in San Pedro Sula by those opposed to the government of Roberto Micheletti was forcefully dispersed on election day. “Police fire tear gas on Honduras poll protesters,” *Agence France Presse*, November 29, 2009.

²² José Saúl Escobar Andrade, Enrique Ortez Sequeira, and David Andrés Matamoros Batso, “Honduran Elections,” Remarks at the Inter-American Dialogue, Washington, DC, October 22, 2009; International Republican Institute, “Hondurans Turn Out to Polls in Credible Elections: IRI’s Preliminary Statement on Honduras’ 2009 National Elections,” November 30, 2009.

²³ “Seguidores de Zelaya no participarán en elecciones aunque haya restitución,” *EFE News Service*, November 8, 2009; “Renuncian importantes dirigentes del liberalismo,” *El Tiempo* (Honduras), November 22, 2009; “Zelayistas dicen que hay incongruencias en la UD,” *El Tiempo* (Honduras), November 23, 2009.

²⁴ Gustavo Palencia, “Honduras busca convencer observadores para cuestionada elección,” *Reuters*, November 12, 2009; “La CE dice que no hay tiempo para una misión electoral y envía dos expertos,” *EFE News Service*, November 11, 2009.

²⁵ “Honduras: Tug of War Between Opposition and De Facto Regime Regarding Flow of Voters,” *Latin America Data Base NotiCen*, December 3, 2009; “Final results in Honduras,” *Latin News Daily*, December 22, 2009.

²⁶ Frente Nacional de Resistencia Contra el Golpe de Estado, “Comunicado No. 41,” November 30, 2009; “El Mercosur anuncia ‘pleno desconocimiento’ de nuevo gobierno de Honduras,” *EFE News Service*, December 8, 2009.

Challenges for the Lobo Administration

While the strength of Lobo's National Party in the legislature should help the government secure approval of its policy agenda, the political crisis left the new President with daunting challenges, including a high level of domestic political polarization, difficulty securing international recognition, a battered economy, and a poor human rights situation exacerbated by the murders of journalists and human rights defenders. The Lobo government also faces significant challenges in the areas of citizen security and economic development. Honduras has had a poor security situation for a number of years, with high rates of violent crime, and the past several governments have struggled to tackle this complex problem. In terms of economic development, the challenge for the government continues to be how to improve economic and social conditions in one of the hemisphere's poorest countries.

International Recognition

President Lobo has had difficulty gaining recognition for his government from the international community. Following the ouster of President Zelaya, many nations expressed concern about the state of democracy in Latin America and the possibility that the events of June 28, 2009 could serve as an example for other countries. Not a single nation recognized the Micheletti government, and since Zelaya was not returned to office prior to the November 2009 election, a number of countries refused to recognize the result.²⁷ President Lobo called on the international community to stop "punishing" the people of Honduras for Zelaya's ouster.²⁸

At this juncture, Honduras is participating in the United Nations and the international financial institutions, but remains suspended from participation in the OAS. While the United States, Canada, many European nations and most Central American nations—with the exception of Nicaragua—have recognized the Lobo government, many South American nations have not yet agreed to extend recognition. These include Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, and Bolivia. Brazil and several other Latin American countries had threatened to boycott a planned European Union-Latin America and Caribbean summit scheduled for mid-May 2010 in Madrid in protest of Spain's invitation to President Lobo to attend. As a result, President Lobo declined to attend the full summit, but attended a separate EU-Central America meeting on May 19, 2010.

The OAS did not officially consider readmitting Honduras at its General Assembly meeting held in early June 2010 in Lima, Peru, but it did approve a resolution sending a high-level delegation to the country to analyze the political situation and report back to the full assembly by July 30, 2010. Secretary of State Clinton called on Latin American countries to welcome Honduras back into the inter-American community, but other countries such as Brazil want to see more progress in Honduras before extending recognition. OAS Secretary General José Miguel Insulza has suggested that allowing former President Zelaya to return to Honduras would pave the way for Honduras to be readmitted to the OAS.²⁹

²⁷ "El Mercosur anuncia 'pleno desconocimiento' de nuevo gobierno de Honduras," *EFE News Service*, December 8, 2009.

²⁸ "Lobo pide a la comunidad internacional que no siga 'castigando' a su pueblo," *EFE News Service*, November 30, 2009.

²⁹ Marc Lacey and Ginger Thompson, "Latin America Still Divided Over a Coup in Honduras," *New York Times*, June 6, 2010.

Political Reconciliation

President Lobo has taken a number of steps to ease the political polarization in Honduras, but still faces significant challenges. Upon taking office in late January 2010, Lobo arranged safe passage out of the country for former President Zelaya and immediately signed a bill providing political amnesty to Zelaya and those who removed him from office. The amnesty covers political and common crimes committed prior to and after the removal of President Zelaya, but does not include acts of corruption or violations of human rights.³⁰ President Lobo also appointed a national unity cabinet with representatives of most political parties, including those on the left, and pledged to engage in dialogue with all sectors of Honduran society.

In April 2010, President Lobo established a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (CVR) to investigate the events before and after the ouster of President Zelaya and to make recommendations so that these events will not be repeated.³¹ Led by former Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein, the CVR has two additional international representatives, Canadian diplomat Michael Kergin and former Peruvian judicial official María Amadilia Zavala Valladares. The two Honduran representatives on the commission are Julieta Castellás, the rector of the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), and Jorge Omar Casco, the former rector of UNAH. The CVR officially began its work on May 4, 2010 with the goal of completing a report by January 2011.

Reflecting the ongoing political polarization in Honduras, the CVR has been criticized by both the left and the right. Human rights groups were not happy that President Lobo acted on his own in establishing the commission and did not consult with civil society groups. There is concern on the left that the CVR could merely serve as window dressing to allow the Lobo government to secure international recognition instead of a real attempt at national reconciliation. On the right, critics fear that the commission could be used as a means to promote the constitutional reform that former President Zelaya had wanted and that became a factor in the country's political crisis.

After visiting Honduras in mid-May 2010, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) called for Honduras to ensure that the CVR includes as a centerpiece of its mission "investigation of human rights violations alleged to have occurred in the context of the coup d'état." The use of the term "coup" to describe the ouster of President Zelaya remains a polarizing issue in Honduras. For this reason, according to Eduardo Stein, the CVR is referring to the Zelaya's ouster as an "alteration of political institutionality" and will examine whether there was a constitutional framework for the events of June 2009 and if rights were respected.³²

In an interview in late May 2010, President Lobo apparently acknowledged that Zelaya's ouster amounted to a "coup."³³ In early June 2010, the President Lobo suggested that extremist elements who disagreed with his reconciliation efforts were plotting to overthrow him.³⁴

³⁰ "Lobo secures exit from Honduras for Zelaya," *Latin News Daily*, January 21, 2010; "Congreso aprueba amnistía para delitos políticos comunes conexos," *El Tiempo* (Honduras), January 27, 2010.

³¹ Honduras, Presidencia de la República, Decreto Ejecutivo Número PCM-011-2010.

³² Tracy Wilkinson, "Sorting out the coup in Honduras, Eduardo Stein talks about his role as head of a reconciliation panel investigating the overthrow of Zelaya," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2010.

³³ Daniel Atlschuler, "Lobo Reverses Stance on Honduran Coup," *Americas Quarterly*, available on the web at <http://www.americasquarterly.org/node/1568/>. Also see a video interview with President Lobo on *CNN México*, available at <http://mexico.cnn.com/videos/2010/05/19/porfirio-lobo-se-defiende-de-la-cumbre>.

The National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP, Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular, formerly the National Resistance Front Against the Coup d'état), is an umbrella group of those who were opposed to Zelaya's removal that has become a broad leftwing movement in Honduras. It does not recognize the work of the CVR, just as former President Zelaya has called on officials from his government not to cooperate with the CVR.³⁵ Led by trade unionist Juan Barahona, the FNRP includes labor unions, worker and campesino organizations, human rights advocates, and other civil society groups. The FNRP remains committed to reforming the Honduran constitution and pushing for greater rights for traditionally excluded sectors of the Honduran population. It continues to call for a constituent assembly to reform the constitution, and is attempting to gather 1.25 million signatures by June 28 (the anniversary of Zelaya's ouster) to petition for a constitutional reform referendum.³⁶ According to some analysts and recent polling, such a project lacks support from the broader public and Honduran political parties.³⁷

Human Rights

Another key challenge for the Lobo government is curtailing the increase in human rights violations that has occurred in 2010. After visiting the country in May 2010, the IACHR expressed deep concern over the continuation of human rights violations, including the murders of journalists, human rights defenders, and social leaders, and the absence of effective investigations. It also reported on threats and acts of harassment against human rights defenders, journalists, communicators, teachers, and members of the FNRP or Resistance. With regard to the CVR, the IACHR maintains that whatever actions the Truth Commission ends up taking, the Honduran government is not exempt from its international obligation to investigate, prosecute, and punish through the judicial system those agents of the government who may have committed human rights violations.

The IACHR expressed special concern about harassment directed against judges who opposed the ouster of President Zelaya. Several of these judges have been dismissed. According to the IACHR, "it is unacceptable that those persons in charge of administering justice who were opposed to the democratic rupture would face accusations and dismissals for defending democracy."³⁸ Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch criticized the firings as weakening judicial independence.

(...continued)

³⁴ "Presidente hondureño insinúa que se está gestando otro golpe de Estado," *Agence France Presse*, June 8, 2010.

³⁵ "Hondureños reclaman en las calles una Constituyente en el Día del Trabajador," *Agence France Presse*, May 1, 2010; Germán Reyes, "Lobo pide no temer a Comisión de Verdad y avala consulta para constituyente," *Agencia EFE*, May 4, 2010; "Zelaya Calls on Former Officials Not to Collaborate with Truth Commission," *ACAN-EFE*, June 8, 2010.

³⁶ "Lobo – no democratic stress in Honduras," *LatinNews Daily*, May 25, 2010.

³⁷ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, May 2010; "Hondurans' Support of Political System Increases, Despite Objection to Way Previous President Was Ousted," *Targeted News Service*, April 15, 2010.

³⁸ IACHR, "IACHR Concerned About Human Rights Violations in Honduras," Press Release No. 54/10, May 19, 2010. Also see the full report of the IACHR on its May 15-18, 2010 visit to Honduras, available at <http://www.cidh.org/countryrep/Honduras10eng/Honduras10TOC.eng.htm>

The IACHR also expressed concern with the Lobo government's appointment of high-ranking Army officers or former Army officers accused of participating in the ouster of President Zelaya to high-level management positions in the government.³⁹

In March 2010, the State Department released its 2009 human rights report on Honduras. The report detailed numerous human rights problems, including "unlawful killings by members of the police and government agents," "arbitrary and summary killings committed by vigilantes and former members of the security forces," and "arbitrary detention and disproportionate use of force by security forces after the June (2009) coup."⁴⁰

Press Freedom and the Killing of Journalists

In the aftermath of Zelaya's forced ouster in June 2009, human rights organizations strongly criticized the new Micheletti government for its attack on press freedom, including government intimidation of journalists and media outlets and the temporary shutdown and interruptions of radio and television broadcasts. Press rights groups maintain that media workers were often targeted and foreign journalists were expelled.

The IACHR issued a report in December 2009 maintaining that there were serious violations of freedom of expression in 2009. The report maintained that the media became extremely polarized during the year, with those journalists and media supportive of the new Micheletti government subject to attacks by those who opposed Zelaya's ouster, and those perceived as encouraging support for resistance to the government subject to severe restrictions by state actions and attacks by private citizens. In April 2010, the Inter American Press Association called for the Lobo government to consider a series of recommendations to combat the crime wave against journalists, including international technical assistance, the establishment of special prosecutors' offices, and the adoption of legal, judicial, and penal reforms.⁴¹ As noted above, in May 2010 the IACHR made a follow-up visit to Honduras and reported that it received information about threats and attacks directed against journalists to keep them from continuing to do their jobs.⁴²

To date in 2010, eight journalists have been murdered in Honduras, making the country the most dangerous in the world for the media this year according to the press rights group Reporters Without Borders. Five journalists were murdered in March alone, while two more were killed in April and one on June 14, 2010. The murders have been condemned by human rights groups, including the IACHR and the Office of the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, which called on the Honduran government to take all necessary measures to prevent these murders, protect at-risk journalists, and make progress in investigating the crimes. Additional reporters have received death threats. Determining the motives for the killings of the journalists has been impeded by the lack of effective investigations. In a June 16, 2010, congressional briefing, however, the IACHR's Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression Catalina Botero

³⁹ IACHR "IACHR Publishes Observations on Follow-up Visit to Honduras," Press Release No. 59/10, June 7, 2010.

⁴⁰ See the full text of the report at <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2009/wha/136117.htm>

⁴¹ Inter American Press Association, "IAPA makes recommendations to President Porfirio Lobo to Combat Violence Against Journalists," Press Release, April 27, 2010.

⁴² IACHR, "Honduras: Human Rights and the Coup d'État," December 30, 2009, and "IACHR Concerned About Human Rights Violations in Honduras," Press Release, No. 54/10, May 19, 2010.

maintained that at least four of those killed had been investigating crime or drug trafficking, while at least two of the victims had voiced opinions about the ouster of President Zelaya.⁴³

Economic and Social Conditions

The Honduran economy has experienced significant changes since the 1990s. Traditional agricultural exports of coffee and bananas are still important, but nontraditional sectors, such as shrimp farming and the maquiladora, or export-processing industry, have grown significantly. In 1998, Honduras was devastated by Hurricane Mitch, which killed more than 5,000 people and caused billions of dollars in damage. The gross domestic product declined by 1.4% in 1999, and the country felt the effects of the storm for several years, with roads and bridges washed out, the agricultural sector hard hit, and scores of orphaned children, many of whom joined criminal gangs. Spurred on by substantial U.S. foreign assistance, however, the economy rebounded with 6% growth in 2000. More recently, Honduras registered growth rates of 6.6% in 2006, 6.3% in 2007, and 4.2% in 2008.⁴⁴ Honduras is now classified by the World Bank as a lower middle income developing economy, with a per capita income of \$1,800 (2008).⁴⁵

The global financial crisis and the political crisis have taken a toll on the Honduran economy. In the first half of 2009, Honduras experienced significant declines in remittances (11%) and export earnings (13%).⁴⁶ The June 2009 forced removal of President Zelaya exacerbated these economic problems, as the international community, which had been expected to finance 20% of the country's budget, imposed economic sanctions on Honduras.⁴⁷ International financial institutions withheld access to some \$485 million in loans and other transfers, the European Union and United States terminated \$126 million in aid, and Venezuela—which provided 50% of Honduras' petroleum imports in 2008—stopped supplying the country with subsidized oil.⁴⁸ Domestic opponents of the ouster placed additional pressure on the economy, engaging in strikes, transportation blockades, and other measures designed to paralyze economic activity.⁴⁹ Some economists have estimated that the political crisis cost Honduras 180,000 jobs and \$20 million daily in lost trade, aid, tourism, and investment.⁵⁰ In order to offset steep declines in government revenue, Micheletti and the Honduran Congress were forced to slash spending, reducing central

⁴³ House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Committee on Foreign Affairs, Briefing by Catalina Botero, Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression, Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, June 16, 2010.

⁴⁴ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, May 2010.

⁴⁵ World Bank, World Development Report, 2010.

⁴⁶ "Honduras: Struggling," *Latin American Economy & Business*, October 2009; "Honduras economy: Political crisis takes its toll," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, October 27, 2009.

⁴⁷ Keny López de Carballo, "Honduras no puede prescindir de créditos," *La Prensa Grafica* (El Salvador), July 9, 2009.

⁴⁸ Robin Emmott, "Aid freeze in post-coup Honduras hurting poor," *Reuters*, November 12, 2009; "Honduras can't touch IMF resources—IMF" *Reuters*, September 9, 2009; "Unión Europea suspende ayuda financiera a Honduras," *Reuters*, July 20, 2009; "Senior State Department Officials Hold Background News Teleconference on Honduras," *CQ Newsmaker Transcripts*, September 3, 2009; "Venezuela halts oil deliveries to Honduras," *EFE News Service*, July 8, 2009; "Negociación solo es para que Zelaya enfrente la justicia," *El Heraldo* (Honduras), July 7, 2009.

⁴⁹ "Manifestantes aseguran que hoy paralizan el país," *El Tiempo* (Honduras), July 23, 2009.

⁵⁰ Blake Schmidt, "Midence Says Honduras Economy to Shrink After Crisis," *Bloomberg*, August 7, 2009; Laura Figueroa, "Honduras' business leaders hope elections restore investors' faith," *Miami Herald*, December 25, 2009.

government expenditures by 10% and decentralized state body expenditures by 20%.⁵¹ Overall, the Honduran economy contracted an estimated 2.1% in 2009.⁵²

Looking ahead, however, the Honduran economy is forecast to grow between 2-3% in 2010. The World Bank, the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Central American Bank of Economic Integration normalized relations with the Lobo government, lifting a suspension of needed multilateral development financing for project loans. The government is also in talks with the International Monetary Fund, which conducted an Article IV consultation meeting in Honduras in May 2010 and could eventually lead to an IMF stand-by agreement. In April 2010, the Lobo government secured congressional approval of a package of tax reforms to improve the government's finances that includes tax increases to increase revenue. Business groups criticized the measure while the IMF mission praised the government's action, but also pointed out the need for the government to contain a growing wage bill.⁵³ This could prove politically difficult for the Lobo government as it faces opposition from public sector unions that were strong supporters of former President Zelaya.⁵⁴

Honduras continues to face significant development challenges and remains one of the most impoverished nations in Latin America. It has an estimated poverty rate of almost 69%; an infant mortality rate of 27 per 1,000; and chronic malnutrition for one out of four children under five years of age. Honduras also has a significant HIV/AIDS crisis, with an adult infection rate of 1.5% of the population. The Garifuna community (descendants of freed black slaves and indigenous Caribs from St. Vincent) concentrated in northern coastal areas has been especially hard hit by the epidemic. The World Bank maintains that development indicators have improved over the past decade because of increased public spending on health and education, but the country's further progress in meeting U.N. millennium development goals are uncertain. It notes that the country remains vulnerable to external shocks, including declines in prices for agricultural exports and natural disasters such as hurricanes and droughts.⁵⁵

Honduras has benefited from several debt-reduction programs, but its foreign debt has begun to increase. A three-year poverty reduction and growth facility (PRGF) agreement with the IMF made Honduras eligible for about \$1 billion in debt relief under the IMF and World Bank's Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative in 2005. The agreement imposed fiscal and monetary targets on the government, and required Honduras to maintain firm macroeconomic discipline and develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy. The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) implemented a debt forgiveness program for its poorest members in 2006. Honduras benefitted from a reduction of \$1.4 billion in foreign debt, freeing government resources to finance poverty alleviation.⁵⁶ Largely as a result of these programs, Honduras' net public debt declined from nearly 46% of gross domestic product (GDP) in 2005 to about 18% in

⁵¹ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, August 2009.

⁵² "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, January 2010.

⁵³ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, May 2010; IMF, "Statement at the Conclusion of an Article IV IMF Mission to Honduras," Press Release No. 10/220, May 28, 2010.

⁵⁴ "Honduras: Lobo isolation hampers reform," *Oxford Analytica*, June 11, 2010.

⁵⁵ U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, "Social Panorama of Latin America," 2009; World Bank, "Honduras Country Brief," April 22, 2010; World Food Programme, "Country Programme – Honduras," 2008. Also see CRS Report RL32713, *Afro-Latinos in Latin America and Considerations for U.S. Policy*, by Clare Ribando Seelke and June S. Beittel.

⁵⁶ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, April 2007; Nestor Ikeda, "Inter-American Development Bank Forgives Debt of 5 Nations," *Associated Press*, March 17, 2007.

2008. Because of the political crisis and the global financial crisis, the country's net public debt climbed to about 24% of GDP in 2009 and the estimate for 2010 is 31%.⁵⁷

Issues in U.S.-Honduran Relations

The United States has had close relations with Honduras over many years. The bilateral relationship became especially close in the 1980s when Honduras returned to democratic rule and became the lynchpin for U.S. policy in Central America. At that time, the country became a staging area for U.S.-supported excursions into Nicaragua by anti-Sandinista forces known as the *contras*. Economic linkages intensified in the 1980s after Honduras became a beneficiary of the Caribbean Basin Initiative providing duty-free importation of Honduran goods into the United States, and more recently with the entrance into force of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) in 2006.

Relations between the United States and Honduras became strained in 2009 because of the country's political crisis. Following Zelaya's ouster, the United States cut off almost all contact with the Honduran government. The United States suspended some foreign assistance, the U.S. Southern Command minimized cooperation with the Honduran military, and the U.S. State Department revoked the visas of members and supporters of the Micheletti government, which assumed power following Zelaya's removal.⁵⁸ Micheletti reacted angrily to U.S. policy toward his government, declaring, "it isn't possible for anyone, no matter how powerful they are, to come over here and tell us what we have to do."⁵⁹

Relations turned around when the United States recognized the November 2009 Honduran elections and moved to restore relations after President Lobo took office in January 2010.⁶⁰ According to Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Craig Kelly in March 2010 congressional testimony, President Lobo's actions to foster national reconciliation and solidify democratic processes led the United States to restore foreign assistance that had been terminated in September 2009. Kelly maintained that U.S. policy will now focus on helping Honduras deal with its numerous daunting challenges, including (1) improving the human-rights climate (especially regarding allegation of serious human rights abuses and reports that persons have been targeted for their political views); (2) combating high levels of corruption, crime, and drug-trafficking; (3) promoting and implementing social and economic reforms to reduce poverty and inequality levels that are among the highest in the hemisphere; and (4) helping Honduras contend with a severe economic crisis that could further destabilize the country.⁶¹ Secretary of State

⁵⁷ "Honduras: Country Report," *Economist Intelligence Unit*, May 2010.

⁵⁸ "Senior Administration Officials Hold State Department Background Briefing via Teleconference on Honduras," *CQ Newsmaker Transcripts*, June 28, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "Termination of Assistance and Other Measures Affecting the De Facto Regime in Honduras," September 3, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "Revocation of Diplomatic Visas," July 28, 2009.

⁵⁹ Carlos Salinas, "Honduran de facto leader vows to cling to power over US objections," *El País* (Spain), August 5, 2009.

⁶⁰ "Clinton says Lobo trying to reconcile Hondurans," *Reuters*, December 9, 2009.

⁶¹ Testimony of Craig Kelly, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, before the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, March 18, 2010.

Hillary Clinton has called on other nations in the hemisphere to welcome Honduras back into the Inter-American community.⁶²

Broad U.S. policy goals for Honduras include a strengthened democracy with an effective justice system that protects human rights and promotes the rule of law, and the promotion of sustainable economic growth with a more open economy and improved living conditions. In addition to providing Honduras with substantial amounts of foreign assistance and maintaining significant military and economic ties, the United States cooperates with Honduras to deal with transnational issues such as illegal migration, crime, narcotics trafficking, trafficking in persons, and port security.

U.S. Foreign Assistance

The United States has provided considerable foreign assistance to Honduras over the past three decades. In the 1980s, the United States provided about \$1.6 billion in economic and military aid as the country struggled amid the region's civil conflicts. In the 1990s, U.S. assistance to Honduras began to wane as regional conflicts subsided and competing foreign assistance needs grew in other parts of the world. Hurricane Mitch changed that trend as the United States provided almost \$300 million in assistance to help the country recover from the 1998 storm. As a result of the new influx of aid, total U.S. assistance to Honduras for the 1990s amounted to around \$1 billion. With Hurricane Mitch funds expended by the end of 2001, U.S. foreign aid levels to Honduras again began to decline.

Recent foreign aid funding to Honduras amounted to nearly \$44 million in FY2007, \$40.5 million in FY2008, and about \$40.2 million in FY2009 (see **Table 1**). For FY2010, an estimated \$51.3 million in regular foreign aid funding was appropriated. For FY2011, the Obama Administration requested nearly \$68 million in foreign aid for Honduras, including almost \$54 million in Development Assistance (DA), \$12 million in Global Health and Child Survival assistance (GHCS), and \$1.3 million in Foreign Military Financing (FMF). U.S. assistance in FY2011 will support a variety of projects designed to enhance security, strengthen democracy, improve education and health systems, conserve the environment, and build trade capacity. Most assistance to the country is managed by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department.

Honduras also receives additional U.S. foreign assistance through the Peace Corps, which has been active in the country since 1963; the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which signed a five-year \$215 million compact for Honduras in June 2005; USAID's Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA), which provides assistance in response to natural disasters; and the Mérida Initiative and its successor Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) managed by the State Department and USAID, discussed below. There are almost 180 Peace Corps volunteers in Honduras on projects related to HIV/AIDS prevention and child survival, protected area management, water and sanitation, and business, municipal and youth development programs. The MCC compact has two components: a rural development project and a transportation project. The rural development project involves providing Honduran farmers with the skills needed to grow and market horticultural crops. The transportation project will improve a highway linking the Atlantic port of Puerto Cortés to Pacific ports and major production centers

⁶² U.S. Department of State, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, "Address to the Organization of American States General Assembly," June 7, 2010.

in Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. It will also involve improvements to main highways and secondary and rural roads, to enable farmers and other businesses to get their products to markets more efficiently.⁶³ With regard to recent disaster assistance, on May 30, 2010, U.S. Ambassador to Honduras Hugo Llorens issued a disaster declaration in response to flooding caused by Tropical Storm Agatha. As of mid-June 2010, the United States has provided \$100,000 through USAID/OFDA for emergency supplies.⁶⁴

Table 1. U.S. Bilateral Assistance to Honduras, FY2007-FY2011

(U.S. \$ in thousands)

Account	FY2007	FY2008	FY2009	FY2010(est.)	FY2011(req.)
Global Health and Child Survival (GHCS) (USAID)	12,034	12,035	11,750	11,000	11,000
Global Health and Child Survival (GHCS) (State)	750	1,000	1,000	1,000	1,000
Development Assistance (DA)	15,540	15,149	21,382	37,491	53,934
Economic Support Funds (ESF)	175	—	—	—	—
Foreign Military Financing (FMF)	675	496	—	1,075	1,300
International Military Education and Training (IMET)	1,404	936	329	700	700
International Narcotics & Law Enforcement (INCLE)	—	744	—	—	—
Nonproliferation, Antiterrorism & Demining (NADR)	268	—	—	—	—
Food Aid	13,005	10,150	5,771	NA	NA
Total	43,851	40,510	40,232	51,266	67,934

Sources: U.S. Department of State, Congressional Budget Justification, Foreign Operations, FY2008-FY2011.

Notes: Global Health and Child Survival (USAID) was formerly called “Child Survival and Health,” but was re-labeled with the FY2010 budget request. Likewise, Global Health and Child Survival (State) was formerly called “Global HIV/AIDS Initiative,” but was re-labeled with the FY2010 budget request.

As noted above, Honduras is also receiving U.S. assistance under the Mérida Initiative and the successor CARSI.⁶⁵ The Mérida Initiative began in FY2008 as a package of U.S. counternarcotics and anticrime assistance to Mexico and Central America, and in FY2010 the Central America portion of the program was renamed CARSI. From FY2008-FY2010, Congress appropriated \$248 for Central America under the Mérida Initiative and CARSI, largely from the ESF and INCLE spending accounts, and Honduras is receiving a portion of this assistance. For example, USAID is managing \$11.75 million in ESF for Honduras under FY2008-FY2010 Mérida Initiative/CARSI funding to support municipal and community-led initiatives to address the root

⁶³ Millennium Challenge Corporation, “Honduras Overview,” available at <http://www.mcc.gov/countries/honduras/index.php>.

⁶⁴ USAID, *Latin America and the Caribbean—Hurricane Season 2010*, Fact Sheet #2, FY2010, June 16, 2010.

⁶⁵ For more information, see CRS Report R40135, *Mérida Initiative for Mexico and Central America: Funding and Policy Issues*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

causes of vulnerability to gangs in areas affected by drug trafficking. The funds are aimed at improving the government's capacity to provide basic services and at supporting gang prevention efforts.⁶⁶ For FY2011, the Obama Administration is requesting \$100 million for CARSI, with \$70 million in ESF and \$30 million in INCLE, and Honduras would receive a portion of that assistance.

In September 2009, the United States terminated \$32.7 million in foreign assistance appropriated for Honduras for FY2009 as a result of the country's political crisis. Some \$10.3 million was intended for security assistance. Another \$11.4 million was intended for economic and social development programs administered by the government of Honduras, including funds for anti-gang activities, trade capacity building, and aid to small farmers.⁶⁷ The final \$11 million was intended for two transportation projects, and was all that remained of the \$215 million MCC compact that Honduras signed in 2005.⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Honduras still received an estimated \$40.2 million in U.S. foreign aid in FY2009, which provided direct assistance to the Honduran people (see **Table 1**). The assistance included funds for education, disease prevention, and democracy promotion.⁶⁹ The U.S. government would have been legally required to terminate some foreign assistance if it had declared Zelaya's ouster a "military coup."⁷⁰ Although the United States never made such a declaration, it terminated the foreign assistance that it would have been required to discontinue had it done so. With the inauguration of President Lobo, Secretary of State Clinton stated that democratic, constitutional government had been restored to Honduras, and the United States moved to restore most of the assistance terminated in September 2009.⁷¹

Military Cooperation

The United States maintains a troop presence of about 600 military personnel known as Joint Task Force (JTF) Bravo at Soto Cano Air Base. JTF Bravo was first established in 1983 with about 1,200 troops, who were involved in military training exercises and in supporting U.S. counterinsurgency and intelligence operations in the region. Today, U.S. troops in Honduras support such activities as disaster relief, medical and humanitarian assistance, counternarcotics operations, and search and rescue operations that benefit Honduras and other Central American countries. Regional exercises and deployments involving active duty and reserve components provide training opportunities for thousands of U.S. troops. In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch

⁶⁶ U.S. Agency for International Development, "Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)," May 26, 2010.

⁶⁷ U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "U.S. Assistance to Honduras," July 7, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "Termination of Assistance and Other Measures Affecting the De Facto Regime in Honduras," September 3, 2009; "Senior State Department Officials Hold Background News Teleconference on Honduras," *CQ Newsmaker Transcripts*, September 3, 2009.

⁶⁸ Prior to Zelaya's ouster, \$80 million of the MCC compact had been dispersed and contracts worth an additional \$124 million had been signed. Information Provided to CRS by the Millennium Challenge Corporation; Millennium Challenge Corporation, "MCC Board of Directors Upholds Importance of Country-Led Development and Accountability," September 9, 2009.

⁶⁹ U.S. Agency for International Development, "Congressional Notification #7," December 18, 2009.

⁷⁰ Section 7008 of the 2009 Omnibus Appropriations Act (P.L. 111-8) states: "None of the funds appropriated or otherwise made available" for bilateral economic assistance or international security assistance "shall be obligated or expended to finance directly any assistance to the government of any country whose duly elected head of government is deposed by military coup or decree."

⁷¹ Testimony of Craig Kelly, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, U.S. Department of State, before the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, March 18, 2010.

in 1998, U.S. troops provided extensive assistance in the relief and reconstruction effort. JTF Bravo has responded to a number of natural disasters in the region in recent years. In November 2009 for example, JTF Bravo provided humanitarian relief to the victims of severe flooding in El Salvador.⁷²

The June 28, 2009 ouster of President Manuel Zelaya has led some to reassess the state of U.S.-Honduran military cooperation. As a result of the Honduran military's role in Zelaya's removal, the United States suspended joint military activities as well as some military assistance to the country.⁷³ The events in Honduras also led some analysts to question the effectiveness of U.S. foreign military training programs.⁷⁴ These analysts contend that such programs have not obtained their desired outcomes given that General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez—who has received U.S. training—led the effort to remove President Zelaya, and the Honduran military reportedly cut off contact with the United States prior to the ouster.⁷⁵

Economic Linkages

U.S. trade and investment linkages with Honduras have increased greatly since the early 1980s. In 1984, Honduras became one of the first beneficiaries of the Caribbean Basin Initiative (CBI), the unilateral U.S. preferential trade arrangement providing duty-free importation for many goods from the region. In the late 1980s, Honduras benefitted from production-sharing arrangements with U.S. apparel companies for duty-free entry into the United States of certain apparel products assembled in Honduras. As a result, maquiladoras or export-assembly companies flourished, most concentrated in the north coast region. The passage of the Caribbean Basin Trade Partnership Act in 2000 (CBTPA), which provided Caribbean Basin nations with NAFTA-like preferential tariff treatment, further boosted Honduran maquiladoras. Trade relations expanded again following the implementation of the Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), which entered into force with Honduras in April 2006.

The United States is by far Honduras' largest trading partner. In 2009, the United States was the destination of almost 48% of Honduran exports and the origin of almost 36% of its imports. Honduras is the top Latin American exporter of knit apparel to the United States. In 2009, U.S. exports to Honduras amounted to about \$3.4 billion, down 30% from 2008. Knit and woven apparel inputs accounted for a substantial portion, as did machinery and petroleum. U.S. imports from Honduras amounted to about \$3.3 billion in 2009, with knit and woven apparel (assembled products from the maquiladora sector) accounting for the lion's share. Other Honduran exports to the United States include coffee, seafood, bananas, electrical wiring, gold, and tobacco.⁷⁶

⁷² Staff Sgt. Chad Thompson, "U.S. military helicopters airlift 61,000 pounds of aid to El Salvador," *Joint Task Force-Bravo Public Affairs*, November 14, 2009.

⁷³ "U.S. suspends joint military activities with Honduras," *EFE News Service*, July 1, 2009; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesman, "U.S. Assistance to Honduras," July 7, 2009.

⁷⁴ "When your aid recipients stop taking your calls," *Center for International Policy*, June 28, 2008, available at <http://www.cipcol.org/>.

⁷⁵ "U.S. suspends joint military activities with Honduras," *EFE News Service*, July 1, 2009; "Senior Administration Officials Hold State Department Background Briefing via Teleconference on Honduras," *CQ Newsmaker Transcripts*, June 28, 2009.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Commerce statistics, as presented by *Global Trade Atlas*.

U.S. foreign direct investment in Honduras amounted to \$700 million in 2008.⁷⁷ More than 150 U.S. companies operate in Honduras, with the most significant U.S. investments in the maquila or export assembly sector, fruit production, tourism, energy generation, shrimp farming, animal feed production, telecommunications, fuel distribution, cigar manufacturing, insurance, brewing, food processing, and furniture manufacturing.⁷⁸ U.S. businesses operating in Honduras were negatively affected by the country's political crisis in 2009. The tourism and manufacturing sectors were especially hard hit as international travelers stayed away and government-imposed curfews prevented workers from getting to their places of employment.⁷⁹

Despite the increases in trade and investment that have occurred since the implementation of CAFTA-DR, Honduran and U.S. officials have expressed concerns about the agreement. Honduran officials are concerned about the loss of agricultural jobs in the corn, rice, beef, poultry, and pork sectors since the country opened its market to U.S. agricultural products. Some fear that the loss of agricultural employment could lead to social unrest if not addressed properly through long-term investment. Although CAFTA-DR has provisions to enforce domestic labor codes and improve labor rights, a number of U.S. officials maintain that the provisions are inadequate given the history of non-compliance with labor laws in many Central American nations. The U.S. State Department's 2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for Honduras found credible evidence that employees engaged in union duties were blacklisted within the maquiladoras and that union leaders were occasionally targeted with threats and violence.⁸⁰

Migration Issues

Temporary Protected Status

In the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the United States provided temporary protected status (TPS) to eligible Hondurans who may otherwise have been deported from the United States. Originally slated to expire in July 2000, TPS status has now been extended nine times. The most recent TPS extension came on May 5, 2010, when the Secretary of Homeland Security announced that the United States would continue to provide TPS for an additional 18 months, expiring on January 5, 2012 (prior to this extension, TPS would have expired July 5, 2010). According to a *Federal Register* notice on the most recent extension, the Secretary of Homeland Security maintained that the extension was warranted because there continues to be a substantial, but temporary, disruption of living conditions in Honduras resulting from Hurricane Mitch, and the country remains unable, temporarily, to adequately handle the return of its nationals.⁸¹ Homeland Security estimates that TPS covers an estimated 66,000 Hondurans residing in the United States.⁸²

⁷⁷ U.S. Department of Commerce, "U.S. Direct Investment Abroad Tables," *Survey of Current Business*, September 2009, p. 225.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of State, "Background Note: Honduras," November 2009.

⁷⁹ Brian Wagner, "Honduran Businesses Suffer as Political Crisis Continues," *Voice of America*, October 16, 2009; Kevin Bogardus, "U.S. Business sees Honduran elections as solution to crisis," *The Hill*, October 28, 2009.

⁸⁰ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, "2009 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," March 11, 2009.

⁸¹ For more details, see 75 *Federal Register* 24734-24737, May 5, 2010.

⁸² "18-Month Extension of Temporary Protected Status for Honduras, Questions and Answers," *States News Service*, May 5, 2010. See CRS Report RS20844, *Temporary Protected Status: Current Immigration Policy and Issues*, by Ruth (continued...)

Deportations⁸³

Deportations to Honduras have increased significantly over the past decade. Approximately 27,600 Hondurans were deported from the United States in FY2009, making Honduras one of the top recipients of deportees on a per capita basis.⁸⁴ Increasing deportations from the United States have been accompanied by similar increases in deportations from Mexico, a transit country for Central American migrants bound for the United States. Honduran policymakers are concerned about their country's ability to absorb the large volume of deportees, as it is often difficult for those returning to the country to find gainful employment. Individuals who do not speak Spanish, who are tattooed, who have criminal records, and/or who lack familial support face additional difficulties re-integrating into Honduran society. In addition to these social problems, leaders are concerned that remittances may start to fall if the current high rates of deportations continue.⁸⁵ In March 2007, the Honduran Congress approved a motion calling for the United States to halt deportations of undocumented Honduran migrants who live and work in the United States.⁸⁶

Some analysts contend that increasing U.S. deportations of individuals with criminal records has exacerbated the gang problem in Honduras and other Central American countries. By the mid-1990s, the civil conflicts in Central America had ended and the United States began deporting unauthorized immigrants, many with criminal convictions, back to the region. Between 2000 and 2004, an estimated 20,000 criminals were sent back to Central America, many of whom had spent time in prisons in the United States for drug and/or gang-related offenses. Some observers contend that gang-deportees have "exported" a Los Angeles gang culture to Central America, and that they have recruited new members from among the local populations.⁸⁷ Although a recent United Nations study found little conclusive evidence to support their claims, the media and many Central American officials have attributed a large proportion of the rise in violent crime in the region to gangs, particularly gang-deportees from the United States.⁸⁸ In July 2007 testimony before the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, the Honduran Ambassador to the United States asserted that although the United States provides information to countries on the criminal background of deportees, the information does not include whether the repatriated nationals are gang members. About 25% of Hondurans deported from the United States in FY2009 were removed on criminal grounds.⁸⁹

(...continued)

Ellen Wasem and Karma Ester.

⁸³ Clare Ribando Seelke contributed information to this section. Also see CRS Report RL34112, *Gangs in Central America*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

⁸⁴ Information Provided to CRS by the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Office of Detention and Removal.

⁸⁵ Pamela Constable, "Deportees' Bittersweet Homecoming; Migration is Boon, Bane for Honduras," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2007.

⁸⁶ "CN Pide a EEUU que Cesen las Deportaciones de Compatriotas," *La Tribuna* (Honduras), March 14, 2007.

⁸⁷ Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2005.

⁸⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Crime and Development in Central America: Caught in the Crossfire*, May 2007.

⁸⁹ Information Provided to CRS by the Department of Homeland Security, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Office of Detention and Removal.

Crime

Honduras, along with neighboring El Salvador and Guatemala, has become fertile ground for gangs, which have been fueled by poverty, unemployment, leftover weapons from the conflicts of the 1980s, and the U.S. deportation of criminals to the region. The two major gangs in Honduras—Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, and the 18th Street gang, or M-18—were first established in Los Angeles in the 1980s by Salvadoran immigrants who were excluded from Mexican-American gangs. The U.S. deportation of criminals back to the region in the 1990s may have helped lay the foundation for the development of MS-13 and M-18 in Central America.⁹⁰ Although estimates of the number of gang members in Central America vary widely, the U.S. Southern Command maintains that there are some 70,000, concentrated largely in Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.⁹¹

In 2008, Honduras had one of the highest murder rates in the world at 57.9 per 100,000 inhabitants,⁹² while in 2009, the murder rate increased even further to 66.8.⁹³ In April 2010, a shootout between rival gangs on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, left nine people dead.

Recent Honduran presidents have implemented varying anti-crime strategies, however, none of them have achieved much success. During his term, President Maduro (2002-2006) increased the number of police officers and signed legislation that made *maras* (street gangs) illegal and gang membership punishable with 12 years in prison. Although the crackdown won popular support and initially reduced crime, its success was short-lived. Following his election, President Zelaya (2006-2010) replaced the previous administration's zero-tolerance policy with dialogue and other outreach techniques designed to convince gang members to give up violence and reintegrate into society.⁹⁴ Failure to achieve concrete results, however, led the Zelaya Administration to shift its emphasis toward more traditional anti-gang law enforcement operations. Zelaya increased the number of police and military troops in the streets and conducted raids against suspected criminals. Nonetheless, as reflected in the statistics cited above, crime and violence in Honduras continued unabated.⁹⁵

President Lobo also pledged to crack down on crime and violence. He has backed away from his 2005 proposal to reinstate the death penalty in Honduras, however, he still favors a hard-line approach.⁹⁶ Since taking office, Lobo has initiated a new security strategy that has begun deploying hundreds of police into the poorest neighborhoods of Tegucigalpa and other large

⁹⁰ Ana Arana, "How the Street Gangs Took Central America," *Foreign Affairs*, May 1, 2005.

⁹¹ House Armed Services Committee, Posture Statement of Gen. Bantz Craddock, Commander, U.S. Southern Command, March 9, 2005.

⁹² "Honduras report signals rising violence," *Latin News Daily*, February 22, 2009.

⁹³ "Honduras has highest murder rate in Central America," *EFE News Service*, March 30, 2010.

⁹⁴ "Honduran Government Reaches Out to Rehabilitate Gangs," *ACAN-EFE*, January 30, 2006.

⁹⁵ Marion Barbel, "Homicide Rate Confirms Honduras as One of Region's Most Violent Nations," *Global Insight Daily Analysis*, September 11, 2008.

⁹⁶ "Honduras: Lobo seeks to unseat the PL," *Latin American Special Reports: Election Watch*, 2009.

cities.⁹⁷ In early June 2010, the Honduran Congress approved a measure authorizing the use of military soldiers to support the police in crime fighting.⁹⁸

In October 2009, the United Nations Development Program published a report on Central America concluding that protecting citizen security is a complex issue requiring intelligent diagnosis about the problem, effective political will, an integral system to adopt and carry out short-term and long-term action, and a commitment to democratic values.⁹⁹

Several U.S. agencies have been involved in assisting Honduras and other Central American countries in dealing with the gang problem.¹⁰⁰ On the law enforcement side, the FBI and the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have worked closely with Honduran law enforcement and the United States has provided anti-gang training for Honduran police and prosecutors.¹⁰¹ In July 2007, the United States pledged \$4 million to help Central American governments draft a regional security strategy to fight street gangs and drug trafficking.¹⁰² The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has supported programs that attack the risk factors associated with gang membership and violence. These include a program to provide basic education skills to at-risk youths and a program to improve the effectiveness and transparency of the justice system.¹⁰³ In addition, under the Mérida Initiative/CARSI described above, USAID is supporting gang prevention efforts at the national level to facilitate broad societal participation in the formulation of a national crime prevention policy as well as efforts at the local level including prevention programs, work and education initiatives, community awareness campaigns and training for municipal workers.¹⁰⁴

Drug Trafficking

Honduras is a transit country for cocaine and heroin flowing from the Andean region of South America to the United States and Europe. Remote and poorly controlled areas of Honduras along the country's north coast are natural safe havens for drug traffickers, providing them with isolated areas for trafficking operations, such as refueling maritime assets and making boat-to-boat transfers. Areas in eastern Honduras and other remote areas are used as transit or storage areas by drug traffickers. The State Department, in its 2010 International Narcotics Strategy Control Report (INCSR), estimated that 200 metric tons of cocaine transited the country in 2009, up from 182 metric tons in 2008. Both air and maritime transshipment reportedly increased in 2009. The flow of precursor chemicals used in the production of methamphetamine decreased in 2009 because of the passage of legislation closing legal loopholes that traffickers had used to import these substances.

⁹⁷ Gustavo Palencia "Nuevo Gobierno Honduras busca aplacar violencia ligada al narco," *Reuters*, January 28, 2010.

⁹⁸ "Militares a reforzar las operaciones policiales durante gobierno de Lobo," *La Tribuna* (Honduras), June 11, 2010.

⁹⁹ UNDP, "Opening spaces to citizen security and human development, Human Development Report for Central America, 2009-2010, Main Findings and Recommendations," October 2009, available at <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/regionalreports/latinamericathecaribbean/irdhc-2009-2010-summary.pdf>

¹⁰⁰ See CRS Report RL34112, *Gangs in Central America*, by Clare Ribando Seelke.

¹⁰¹ House Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Statement of John P. Torres, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Hearing on "Gangs and Crime in Latin America," April 20, 2005.

¹⁰² "U.S. Offers Funds to Help Fight Central America Gangs," *Reuters*, July 18, 2007.

¹⁰³ USAID, "Central America and Mexico Gang Assessment, Annex 3: Honduras Profile," April 2006.

¹⁰⁴ USAID, "Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI)," May 26, 2010.

The State Department asserted in the 2010 INCSR that, prior to the June 2009 ouster of President Zelaya, increased and improved cooperation between U.S. agencies and Honduran police and military had led to a significant increase in cocaine seizures. Subsequently, however, the report maintained that interdiction decreased as a result of the reassignment of security forces by the Micheletti government to counter political unrest and also because of the suspension of U.S. assistance which diminished the ability of Honduran police and military to fight narcotics trafficking. Overall in 2009, Honduras seized 6.6 metric tons of cocaine, 2,795 stones of crack cocaine, 923 kilograms of marijuana, and nearly 2.8 million pseudoephedrine pills, according to the INCSR, with these numbers reflecting decreases from 2008.

The United States has supported a variety of anticorruption, police training, and maritime operations programs intended to improve Honduras' counternarcotics capabilities. According to the 2010 INCSR, during 2009 there was improved communication and coordination between U.S. law enforcement and intelligence entities and Honduras military and police elements in response to narcotics air and maritime shipments. The United States also funded construction of a Honduran naval base in Barra de Caratasca in the Mosquitia region of northeastern Honduras. The INCSR also maintained that cooperation with Honduras via a bilateral maritime agreement remained strong in 2009, and led to the U.S. Coast Guard interdiction of four vessels and the removal of over 4.3 metric tons of cocaine.

Honduras' counternarcotics efforts continue to face a number of challenges, including limited resources, a weak enforcement presence in the sparsely populated areas of the Atlantic coast and other remote areas, corruption within the government and law enforcement, and weak prosecution of drug cases. Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) also have expanded their operations in Central America, including Honduras, where the Gulf, Sinaloa, and Los Zetas DTOs are reported to have a presence.¹⁰⁵

Human Trafficking

According to the State Department's 2010 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report, Honduras is primarily a source and transit country for women and children trafficked for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation. Many victims are trafficked from rural areas to tourist and urban locales such as Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, and the Bay Islands. Destination countries for trafficked Honduran women and children include the United States, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Belize. There are also foreign victims of commercial sexual exploitation in Honduras, most having been trafficked from neighboring countries, including economic migrants en route to the United States.

The State Department maintains that Honduras does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, however, it notes that the government is making significant efforts to do so. As a result, Honduras is considered a so-called "Tier 2" country. The 2101 report recognized the Honduran government's law enforcement actions against sex trafficking offenders and its partnership with international organizations to provide training to government officials and members of civil society. However, the report also maintained that

¹⁰⁵ "Carteles mexicanas azotan a Honduras," *La Prensa* (Honduras), August 27, 2008; "Los Zetas hondureños, nueva pesadilla para los inmigrantes," *El Tiempo* (Honduras), March 18, 2009; Louisa Reynolds, "Region: Los Zetas increase presence in Central America, seek to displace local cartels," *Noticen: Central American & Caribbean Affairs*, May 13, 2010.

government services for trafficking victims remained virtually non-existent, that laws failed to prohibit trafficking for forced labor, and that the number of trafficking-related convictions had decreased. In the report, the State Department recommended that Honduras amend its anti-trafficking laws to prohibit forced labor; increase efforts to investigate and prosecute all trafficking offenses; convict and sentence traffickers; improve victims' access to shelter, aid, and essential services; develop formal procedures for identifying victims; and initiate efforts to raise awareness of human trafficking.¹⁰⁶

Port Security

Honduras and the United States have cooperated extensively on port security. For the United States, port security emerged as an important element of homeland security in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Honduras views such cooperation as important in order to ensure the speedy export of its products to the United States, which in turn could increase U.S. investment in the country. In March 2006, U.S. officials announced the inclusion of the largest port in Honduras, Puerto Cortés, in the U.S. Container Security Initiative (CSI). CSI is operated by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) of the Department of Homeland Security, and uses a security regime to ensure that all containers that pose a potential risk for terrorism are identified and inspected at foreign ports before they are placed on vessels destined for the United States. Honduras also participates in the Department of Energy's Megaports Initiative, which supplies ports with equipment capable of detecting nuclear or radioactive materials, and the Secure Freight Initiative (SFI), which deploys equipment capable of scanning containers for radiation and information risk factors before they are allowed to depart for the United States. Puerto Cortés was one of six ports around the world chosen to be part of the first phase of the SFI.¹⁰⁷

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¹⁰⁶ U.S. Department of State, Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, "Trafficking in Persons Report," June 2010.

¹⁰⁷ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "DHS and DOE Launch Secure Freight Initiative," Press Release, December 7, 2006, and "Secure Freight Initiative Becomes Fully Operational in United Kingdom, Pakistan, and Honduras," Press Release, October 12, 2007.